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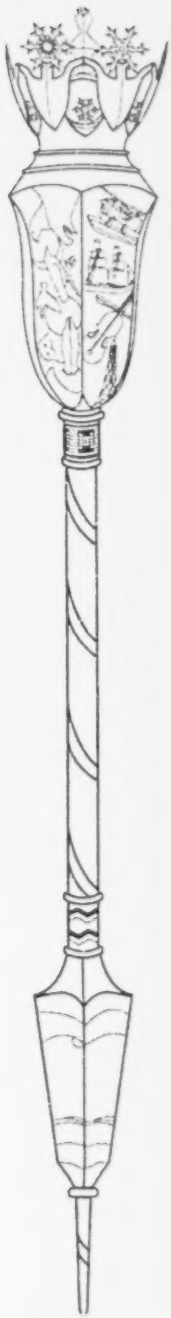

Northwest Territories Legislative Assembly

Standing Committee on Social Programs

Report on the Review of the Draft 2003-2004 Main Estimates

Chairperson: Mr. Brendan Bell

105-00365/

Northwest Territories
Legislative Assembly
Standing Committee on Social Programs

FEB 1 4 2003

HONONOURABLE ANTHONY (TONY) WHITFORD
SPEAKER OF THE LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY

Dear Mr. Speaker:

Your Standing Committee on Social Programs has the honour of presenting its Report on the Review of the Draft 2003-2004 Main Estimates and commends it to the House.

Brendan Bell, MLA
Chairman

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Report on the Review of the Draft 2003-2004 Main Estimates
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Standing Committee on Social Programs
Report on the Review of the Draft 2003/2004 Main Estimates

Introduction

The Standing Committee on Social Programs met from January 13 to January 24, 2003 to review the Draft Main Estimates. The Social Programs envelope includes the Department of Education, Culture and Employment, the Department of Justice, the Department of Health and Social Services and the Northwest Territories Housing Corporation. The Committee, in our discussions with the Ministers raised a number of issues. These discussions resulted in the Committee making some specific recommendations. The issues and recommendations will be discussed in detail under the individual Departments.

The Standing Committee on Social Programs is very concerned with the Capital Allocation Process. Several large infrastructure projects, which have appeared during this Business Planning Cycle, are causing Members to question the validity of the current methodology in determining how the GNWT's limited funding for capital projects are allocated.

The Social Programs Committee relayed these concerns to the Standing Committee on Accountability and Oversight, who in turn, wrote a letter requesting that the funding for the renovation to the Fort Smith Health Centre, the construction and renovation of Student Housing for Aurora College and the construction of a new Territorial Women's Correctional Centre be deleted from the Infrastructure Acquisition Plan until such time as their inclusion could be justified to the Standing Committee on Social Programs.

In the response to the letter from the Accountability and Oversight Committee the Minister of Finance declined to remove the projects from the Infrastructure Acquisition Plan. The Minister argued that as these projects were for future years, the decision would ultimately rest with the 15th Assembly and that the Committee's concerns could be dealt with over the next Business Planning Cycle.

Members of the Standing Committee on Social Programs are very disappointed the Government's response ignores the Committee's valid concerns. The Committee believes that because the Infrastructure Acquisition Plan is included as part of the Main Estimates, residents of the NWT think the projects and funding for future years have received due diligence from the Committee process. This is not the case for future year Infrastructure Projects.

The danger in allowing these projects to stay in the Infrastructure Allocation Plan is the tendency of the funding numbers to become institutionalized. For example, the Government proposes to replace the Territorial Women's' Correctional Centre at a cost of just over $10.0 million. At this time, even the Department agrees with the Committee that the functionality and the cost estimates of the proposed facility must be reviewed.

The Committee fears leaving the $10.0 million in the Infrastructure Allocation Plan will mean any planning process will use that number as the end target.

Because of time constraints and other issues surrounding the transition to the next Assembly there may not be sufficient time for the next Standing Committee on Social Programs to fully examine these capital projects. The Standing Committee on Social Programs will therefore be recommending to its successor that the Territorial Women's Correctional Centre, the Student Housing for the Aurora College Campus and the renovation of the Fort Smith Health Centre be removed from the Infrastructure Acquisition Plan until such time as the respective Department's can justify the need for these projects.

Department of Education, Culture and Employment

Introduction

The Standing Committee on Social Programs met on January 14th, 2003 to consider the 2003/2004 Draft Main Estimates for the Department of Education, Culture and Employment.

Members note increases of $150,000.00 to fund two positions with the Aurora Research Institute as part of the Social Agenda Action Plan and $474,000.00 relating to the Recruitment and Retention Remittance Program for healthcare professionals as part of the Student Financial Assistance Program. Finally, Committee notes that $5,197,000.00 was transferred from the Capital Allocation to fund infrastructure contributions. This is an accounting requirement and is not new funding. The infrastructure contributions are: $4,955,000.00 to Yellowknife School District # 1 for renovations to Mildred Hall School, $100,000.00 for local Museum improvements and $142,000.00 for improvements to community libraries.

Capital Allocation Concerns and Student Housing on Fort Smith Campus

The Standing Committee on Social Programs is very concerned with the capital allocation process. Members of the Committee could not reconcile replacing and renovating student housing for the Fort Smith Campus of Aurora College taking into account the equal or greater need for student housing on the Inuvik and Yellowknife campuses.

During the review of the Business Plan the Department provided Committee with information showing that more student housing units were occupied by residents of Fort Smith than from any other community. Conversely, there were no residents of Yellowknife or Inuvik occupying student housing in their respective communities.

The Department did state that Fort Smith residents were only allowed to rent student housing on a semester by semester basis after students from outside of Fort Smith had their housing needs addressed. The Department justified this because otherwise the units would be empty. By placing Fort Smith residents in these "surplus" units the College would maintain its revenue stream. The Committee has been unable to determine, from the scant information provided by the Department thus far, whether Aurora College is a de facto landlord for residents of Fort Smith.

If the units are empty and rented to students from Fort Smith on a regular and ongoing basis, the question then becomes whether they are needed or not.

Members of the Standing Committee were also made aware of the serious underutilization of the Breynat Hall. This called into question the need to renovate singles housing in the Brown and Green Apartments.

Unless the Department can provide proper and thorough justification of the need to replace or renovate student housing in Fort Smith, the Standing Committee is inclined to support the building of student housing in Inuvik to take advantage of the economies of scale associated with the construction of the new Campus.

This concern was passed onto the Standing Committee on Accountability and Oversight and was subsequently conveyed to the Minister of Finance

The Minister's response indicates the Department plans to proceed with the $3.1 million renovations to the Brown and Green Apartments, but will review the options for the replacement of the other student housing in Fort Smith.

The response to the practice of renting housing to residents of Fort Smith indicates the Department did not understand the Committee's concerns over the appropriateness of such a practice.

NWT Arts Strategy

The Standing Committee on Social Programs was very pleased to see the level of support available in grants to NWT artisans and performers was roughly doubled to $71,000 from last year's $36,000.

This is a good first step in showing our commitment to the arts and performing community.

Members of the Committee look forward to having the opportunity to comment on the recommendations of the NWT Arts Advisory Panel prior to the Government finalizing an NWT Arts Strategy.

Regional Reorganization

The Department of Education, Culture and Employment has changed Regional Manager positions in the Deh Cho and Sahtu to Regional Superintendent positions at a cost of $160,000 for salary increases and the hiring of administrative support staff.

The Department has justified this change by pointing out this aligns the Department's administrative structure with regional land claims.
In addition, the Department pointed out the Departments of Resources, Wildlife and Economic Development, Municipal and Community Affairs, Financial Management Board Secretariat, Transportation, Health and Social Services and the Housing Corporation have either senior managers or Board structures in place in one or both of the regions.

The Standing Committee is not opposed to regional reorganization but are concerned with the apparently ad hoc approach and the lack of co-ordination, planning and direction provided by Cabinet to the Departments.

It is obvious that regional reorganization, whether official or ad hoc, has cost implications to this government. If the purpose is to align the administrative structures of the Departments with land claim agreements, the associated costs must be part of self-government negotiations with the federal government and should not be absorbed by the GNWT.

This concern was passed on to the Standing Committee on Accountability and Oversight and was subsequently relayed to the Minister of Finance for a response.

The Minister's response indicates the government will be undertaking an analysis of incremental operating costs and entering into negotiation with the Federal Government for funding.

The Committee hopes the Government's optimism on negotiating federal funding is warranted.

Bachelor of Education Degree Program

The Members of the Standing Committee are pleased to note the progress being made on delivering a 4-year Bachelor of Education Degree in the Northwest Territories. Barring any further complications, Aurora College will be delivering

the fourth and final year of a Bachelor of Education Degree at the Fort Smith Campus starting in September of 2004.

In the short-term the Native Studies Major for the Bachelor of Education Program is appropriate, however Members note having only one available major will reduce the candidate pool once the initial need is addressed.

In the long-term it will be necessary to develop 2 or 3 majors for students in the Bachelor of Education degree program to ensure the ongoing sustainability of such a program.

Gap in Services 16 to 18 Year Olds

Members of the Standing Committee remain concerned with the gap in services experienced by 16 to 18 year olds who are no longer domiciled with their parents or guardians.

On the face of it, it appears to Committee Members the Departments in the Social Envelope, particularly the Department of Education, Culture and Employment and the Department of Health and Social Services, are making a concentrated effort to address this issue through legislation and improved access to services.

Nonetheless individual Members of the Legislative Assembly are contacted on a regular basis by 16 to 18 year olds who are having problems accessing the services they need to address their basic needs. Many of these problems relate to a lack of understanding of present government policy by front-line workers in the Income Support and Health and Social Services fields and are compounded by the clients not knowing which agency to access for services.

It is clear that in addition to booklets, outlining how 16 to 18 year olds can access services, there is a need to ensure that Income Support and Health and Social Services Workers are properly trained in how to help these young people.

Income Support Food Basket

The Standing Committee on Social Programs would like to thank the Minister and his Department for their annual review and adjustments of the Food Basket prices in each community in the NWT, during the life of this Assembly. It should be noted that this is not something the Department is legislated to do on an annual basis and the Minister is to be commended.

The Committee looks forward to being informed of the results of the Department's next survey on Income Support Food Baskets.

Teacher Turnover

Members of the Standing Committee on Social Programs are very concerned with the rate of teacher turnover in our smaller communities. The lack of affordable, suitable rental accommodation is one of the prime contributors to this crisis.

The Committee is well aware of the government's policy of not getting back into employee housing. Members would however, point out to the Minister that without educators who are committed to their communities for the long term, the quality of education we can offer our children will be forever suspect. Children need some continuity in their education and in some communities the lack of affordable housing means a new teacher every year.

Committee Members look forward to being informed of the results of the Deputy Minister's recommendations on housing for professionals. The Committee notes previous attempts to provide housing to professionals through Aboriginal Development Corporations have been less than successful due to the high rent that must be charged to ensure a rate of return on the investment. Relying on the private sector to address the rental needs of professionals in our smaller communities may not be realistic.

The Standing Committee is aware that YK District #1 owns an apartment building they rent to their employees at market rent. It may be necessary to change legislation to allow other school boards to acquire or build housing for their employees in some communities. It could be argued that because Education Boards are arms-length from the Government this would not be tantamount to the GNWT getting back into employee housing.

On-Line Learning Opportunities

The Standing Committee on Social Programs has been supportive of the Department's efforts to expand on-line learning opportunities to the communities. The more choices that students have in the courses they can take; the better choices they can make about their futures.

Members are concerned about uptake in our smaller communities and the Department has promised to provide the Committee with further information.

Oil and Gas Training

The Standing Committee on Social Programs acknowledges the work the Department and Industry have done to date in delivering oil and gas training to the residents of the Mackenzie Valley given the limited scope and resources that have been available thus far.

However, the Members of the Standing Committee note the majority of training provided was focussed on ensuring entry-level industry safety standards were met. It is time for oil and gas Training in the Northwest Territories to go to the next level.

The proposal by the Oil and Gas Territorial Training Committee to the Federal Government appears to accomplish this. The long-term job opportunities and required training associated with the construction and operation of a Mackenzie Valley Pipeline are identified along with the required funding to maximise northern participation in such a pipeline.

The Committee supports the Department in its efforts to access federal funding for further advanced oil and gas training for our residents.

Minor Capital Funding for Education Boards

Members of the Standing Committee have heard complaints from some Education Board Members about the inadequacies of the current Minor Capital Funding Formula. In the case of the Yellowknife School Districts, Members have been told it has not been adjusted in over 10 years.

Members were also concerned whether there was equity between the school boards that did their own maintenance and those that contracted with the Department of Public Works and Services.

The Committee was pleased to hear the subject of Minor Capital Funding would be the subject of negotiation between the Department and the affected school boards over the next business planning cycle. The Standing Committee on Social Programs would appreciate being kept apprised of the results of these negotiations.

Department of Justice

Introduction

The Standing Committee on Social Programs met with the Minister and his officials on January 16th, 2003 to discuss the Draft Main Estimates for the Department of Justice.

Since reviewing the Business Plan in September of 2002, the Standing Committee notes a reduction of $218,000 for the Department's Amortization of infrastructure and a $150,000 increase to develop and implement the new Intensive Rehabilitation Custody and Support Program required under the new federal *Youth Criminal Justice Act.*

Additional Policing for the Northwest Territories

Members of the Standing Committee on Social Programs were pleased to see this budget deals with the issue of single-member detachments. There is an additional $560,000 to pay for equipment and one additional RCMP officer each in Wha Ti, Holman and Paulatuk.

However, Committee would be remiss if we did not point out that the initiative to eliminate single-member detachments was more or less forced on the GNWT because of a recent Labour Board of Canada decision and was not the result of any forward planning on the part of the Department of Justice.

Members of the Standing Committee on Social Programs have been calling for an increase in the number of RCMP Officers for the last three years. The RCMP in larger communities such as Yellowknife and Inuvik are taxed to the limit given the rise in population and an increase in criminal activity associated with improved economic opportunities. Police in these communities also spend a disproportionate amount of time dealing with public intoxication.

Police in other communities are also impacted by inappropriate behaviour associated with the increase in disposable income. Other issues such as the RCMP having to dedicate already stretched resources to Highway Patrol, policing in Wood Buffalo National Park, court appearances, shift scheduling, maternity leave and training requirements are also impacting on the ability of the RCMP to have a strong presence in NWT communities.

The Standing Committee on Social Programs was first made aware of the RCMP preparing a business case justifying an increase in the number of RCMP Officers during the review of the 2001/2002 Main Estimates. Members are disappointed that the Department of Justice has been unable to arrive at consensus with the RCMP on increased policing requirements for the Northwest Territories in the past two years.

The Committee pointed out in last year's Main Estimate Review that the Government of Nunavut provided funding for an additional 14 RCMP Officers in their 2002/2003 Budget. It was hoped that the Minister of Justice would show the necessary political will to prepare a submission to the Financial Management Board advocating an increase in the number of police in NWT communities.

There appears to have been no tangible progress made on increasing the number of RCMP Officers in the NWT since the Committee discussed the issue with the Minister and his Officials during the Business Plan Review in September of 2002.

Alcohol and Substance Abuse Policy for Yellowknife

As previously mentioned, Yellowknife in particular, has a serious problem with public intoxication. The Standing Committee was told over the past year just over 5000 people were lodged in cells for public intoxication. Admittedly, many of these people were repeat offenders.

Committee was interested to hear the Yellowknife RCMP is developing a plan to deal with the issue of public intoxication in Yellowknife, with a particular emphasis on repeat offenders.

The Committee supports such an effort and hope that an inter-disciplinary approach can be developed that is inclusive of all agencies involved in the treatment of addictions and of homelessness.

Legal Aid Funding

The Federal Department of Justice is due to release a report on the state of Legal Aid in Canada this spring.

Like the Department, the Standing Committee on Social Programs hopes the Federal Government will accept its responsibility to adequately fund legal aid in Canada. In addition, the Committee hopes the Federal Government will recognize the increased costs of delivering justice in the Northwest Territories and not just fund on a per-capita basis.

The Standing Committee looks forward to discussing the Federal Report on the State of Legal Aid in Canada with the territorial Minister of Justice when it is released.

Capital Allocation Concerns and the NWT Women's Correctional Centre

Members of the Standing Committee on Social Programs were first made aware of the plan to replace the NWT Women's Correctional Centre in Fort Smith during the 2003/2006 Business Plan Review in September of 2002.

The Standing Committee on Social Programs does not dispute the fact the NWT Women's Correctional Centre needs replacing. What Members do dispute is a cost-estimate of $10.0 million to replace a facility that, on average, has 10 inmates.

On the face of it, it appears to Committee Members that major capital projects are being parachuted into the capital allocation process, without any regard for design or utilization factors.

Members of the Committee have noted a trend of poor planning and consultation in the building of capital projects for the Department of Justice. Even leaving aside the issue of cost-overruns on the North Slave Correctional Centre and the Female Young Offenders Facility in Inuvik which the Department had little control over. The whole history of the Dene K'onia Young Offender Facility with its proposed land swaps and subsequent lack of community consultation on locating such a facility, coupled with the lack of planning on the Territorial Women's Correctional Centre have raised serious concerns for Committee Members.

The Deputy Minister of the Department commented that in reviewing their material in preparation for the meeting with the Standing Committee the Department noted the figure of $10.0 million for replacing the Women's Correctional Centre "seemed a large number for a small number of people".

The Department has promised to revisit its estimates on the cost of replacing the Territorial Women's Correctional Centre.

In advance of that promise, Committee Members were extremely concerned that leaving the $10.0 million figure in the Capital Allocation Plan would result in the number becoming "institutionalized", and thus hard to change in subsequent Capital Allocation Plans.

The Standing Committee on Social Programs passed this concern onto the Standing Committee on Accountability and Oversight. In a letter to the Minister of Finance, the Accountability and Oversight Committee has asked that the replacement of the Territorial Women's Correctional Centre be removed from the Capital Allocation Plan until such time as it can be justified to the Standing Committees.

The response from the Minister of Finance indicates the Minister of Justice has agreed the functionality and cost estimates for the project need to be reviewed.

The response also indicates the Territorial Women's Correctional Centre will be a 20-bed facility housing both minimum and maximum-security inmates. This is first time Committee Members were made aware the Department had plans to house maximum-security inmates in this facility. In fact, during the In-Camera Review of the Main Estimates, Committee Members had asked whether the replacement would mean higher security and had been told it was just a replacement of the existing minimum-security facility.

Maximum-Security Inmates also imply the Department would be seeking opportunities to enter into return of service agreements with Corrections Canada for the repatriation of NWT residents in the federal system. This was also not mentioned to Committee. This further compounds the Committee's sense of frustration and fosters the belief the Department is adjusting programming to justify capital spending.

Community Justice Committees

Committee Members remain committed to the concept of Community Justice Committees and are generally pleased with the Department's efforts to expand this program to all communities in the Northwest Territories.

Alternative sentencing arrangements, such as sentencing circles, allow young offenders and some adults to avoid contact with the criminal justice system and provide them with a genuine opportunity to change their behaviour.

Members are also aware that some Community Justice Committees have gone beyond the mandate envisioned by the Department of Justice and are actually working with inmates from their communities to assist in their eventual reintegration to the community.

The Standing Committee has commented previously on the need for a program of, for lack of a better word, "aftercare" for persons released to the community after serving time in a correctional facility.

It is recommended that the Department seriously consider providing funding to those Community Justice Committees that are willing to engage their community in assisting in the reintegration of offenders into the daily lives of their community.

Treatment versus Incarceration

One thing the 14th Assembly can take dubious credit for is the replacement of the majority of correctional facilities in the Northwest Territories. It is unfortunate that a significant portion of funding available for capital infrastructure during the life of this Assembly had to be expended on replacing ageing correctional facilities.

The reason replacing the Yellowknife Correctional Centre was so expensive was the need to provide adequate programming space to run the programs to help inmates reintegrate into society upon their release. While providing the necessary programming space is important for rehabilitating offenders, it is equally important to provide the programming and services that keep people from coming into contact with the criminal justice system in the first place.

The Department of Justice is tasked with keeping residents of the Northwest Territories safe and in providing the programs and services that will help offenders reintegrate into the community. The Committee believes the Department now has the infrastructure to accomplish their mandate. The other Government Department's roles are to ensure residents have a solid education, have access to adequate housing and access to programs and services that encourage a healthy lifestyle.

We will have spent roughly $76,000,000.00 in replacing the correctional and young offender facilities in the Northwest Territories by the end of 2003/2004. It is time now to concentrate on the programs and services that encourage residents to live a healthy lifestyle, to deal with their addictions and mental health issues to ensure we will not have to build more correctional facilities to house residents who have come into conflict with the law.

Family Violence Protection Legislation

The Standing Committee on Social Programs is convinced there is value in introducing and passing legislation on Family Violence Protection that would allow the RCMP to remove perpetrators of violence from the family home.

The current situation almost always results in the victim of violence being forced to flee the family home in search of protection.

The Standing Committee on Social Programs has expressed its frustration in the past on the lack of movement by the Department in addressing the need for Family Violence Protection Legislation in the Northwest Territories. In the absence of any clear commitment on the part of the Department and Government and in response to clear direction by various Non-Governmental Organizations, including the Government's own Social Agenda, the Standing Committee on Social Programs offers the following recommendation:

The Standing Committee on Social Programs recommends the Government introduce Family Violence Protection Legislation at the earliest opportunity for consideration by this Legislature prior to the dissolution of the 14th Assembly.

Northwest Territories Housing Corporation

Introduction

The Standing Committee on Social Programs met on January 16th, 2003 to consider the Main Estimates for the Northwest Territories Housing Corporation.

Since reviewing the Corporation's 2003/2004 proposed budget during the review of the 2003/2006 Business Plans in September of 2002, the Standing Committee noted a $747,000.00 increase in the Amortization Estimate, as well as a $1,720,000.00 increase relating to the Community Development Action Plan which will help address serious housing issues in Lutsel K'e, Hay River Reserve, Fort Providence, Fort Liard, Wha Ti and Fort Good Hope.

Accountability and Universal Partnership Agreements

Members of the Standing Committee on Social Programs have many concerns with how the NWT Housing Corporation (NWTHC) will monitor programs and services delivered by Local Housing Authorities (LHA's) under Universal Partnership Agreements (UPA).

While supportive of the concept of empowerment and allowing LHA's to make their own choices in how to deliver housing programs in their communities, there needs to be systems in place to ensure public money is being spent effectively.

Past experiences suggest there needs to be an emphasis placed on the inspection of new construction and renovations. Members are aware of serious deficiencies in the construction and maintenance of social housing units. In some cases the same LHA or Development Corporation that constructed or renovated the social housing unit was also responsible for signing off on the unit as complete.

This is unacceptable to Committee Members.

The NWTHC spends a significant amount of money per social housing unit because of the high cost of construction and materials in the north. To ensure value for money, it is essential an efficient inspection program be in place.

In discussion with the Minister and his officials, Committee Members were informed that part of the Annual Audited Financial Statements included the Auditor verifying work was accomplished by taking a representative sample.
For example, Members note an Auditor would be qualified to ask a social housing client whether the LHA added a porch to their unit. The Auditor would not be qualified to determine whether the porch was properly tied to the rest of the structure, whether sufficient insulation was placed in the floors and walls and whether the porch was adequately blocked or pinned to bedrock.

In response to a question asked during the Business Plan Review, the NWTHC stated that the Corporation usually conducts interim and final inspections on construction projects. Committee Members were concerned with the use of the word usually. It seems to imply there is an ad hoc approach to ensuring the terms of construction contracts are fulfilled and that the NWTHC is receiving value for money.

During the Business Plan Review, the Standing Committee on Social Programs questioned the need for the Housing Corporation. If the Corporation's focus is on developing community capacity through the development of such mechanisms such as Universal Partnership Agreements it stands to reason there should be an oversight function as part of the process.

Members believe the Housing Corporation is evolving into a funding mechanism for Local Housing Authorities to ensure the orderly flow of funding from Canada Mortgage and Housing and the Territorial Government to the communities. The Committee questioned whether this function could be accomplished through the use of a shell corporation administered through a government department and has asked that the future of the Housing Corporation be examined as part of the Transition Planning to the 15th Assembly of the Legislative Assembly.

Access to Information Legislation and the Housing Corporation

Prior to the adoption of the *Access to Information and Protection of Privacy Act*, Members of the Legislative Assembly were kept well informed of the activities of the NWT Housing Corporation within their constituencies.

The Members of Committee understand the need to protect the privacy of persons accessing social housing, but would point out the total lack of information now available to Members hampers their ability to monitor the activities of the Housing Corporation and represent the interests of their constituents.

There is an unnecessary amount of time being spent on verifying information provided to Members by their constituents with officials of the Housing Corporation. Members of the Committee also believe the NWTHC is wasting valuable resources on determining the amount or type of information they can release to Members involved in constituency work.

The Committee appreciated the commitment of the Minister and his officials to work on a protocol that will allow for the release of information to the Members of the Assembly in a timely manner that respects the privacy of the client and addresses the needs of the Members.

Harmonization Strategy

The Standing Committee on Social Programs notes harmonization of the way income is calculated by the Department of Education, Culture and Employment's Income Support Division and the Northwest Territories Housing Corporation will become effective on April 1st, 2003.

Members are pleased this oft-delayed initiative is being implemented and believe the new system provides for the equitable treatment of all residents of social housing. The Department of Education, Culture and Employment and the NWT Housing Corporation are to be commended for their efforts in ensuring the development of an equitable program.

There will be glitches as this program is implemented. The Housing Corporation is encouraged to work with clients to mitigate the effects on their households.

Regional Reorganization and the Housing Corporation

Members note the NWT Housing Corporation reorganized their regional structures from three regions to 5 districts aligned with land claims two years ago.

The Standing Committee is not opposed to regional reorganization but are concerned with the apparently ad hoc approach and the lack of co-ordination, planning and direction provided by Cabinet to the Departments.

It is obvious that regional reorganization, whether official or ad hoc, has cost implications to this government. If the purpose is to align the administrative structures of the Departments with land claim agreements, the associated costs must be part of self-government negotiations with the federal government and should not be absorbed by the GNWT.

This concern was passed on to the Standing Committee on Accountability and Oversight and was subsequently relayed to the Minister of Finance for a response.

The Minister's response indicates the Government would be analyzing incremental costs and entering into negotiations with the Federal Government for funding to address these costs.

The Committee hopes the Government's optimism is justified.

Software Development Costs and Marketing

During the Business Plan Review Members questioned an apparent focus on the marketing of the Housing Corporation's Maintenance Management Operating System, or MMOS, a proprietary software program.

Members found this focus somewhat disturbing given the belief the core business of the Housing Corporation should be to provide and help in the development of affordable housing for northerners.

The information provided by the Housing Corporation indicates they expect to recover all of their software development and marketing costs in the very near future.

Members are willing to give limited support for the marketing of the MMOS Program with the understanding that the primary focus of the Housing Corporation should be on building housing and supporting the development of the housing industry.

Collection Strategy on Mortgage Arrears

The lack of a cohesive collection strategy for mortgages in arrears held by the NWT Housing Corporation was the subject of comment by the Federal Auditor General in last year's Report on Other Matters.

Past practices did not allow for timely collection or establish a consistent process to deal with mortgages that are in arrears.

Information provided by the Corporation, subsequent to our meeting on the Draft Main Estimates indicates a strategy has been implemented to ensure timely payment of mortgages and which also recognizes that some people's circumstances have changed meaning they can no longer pay their mortgage.

The Committee did have concerns with the communication component of the new Collections Strategy. The Housing Corporation needs to provide written explanations for the new policies, as well as the individual counselling proposed in the Strategy.

The strategy is to concentrate on those clients who have the financial wherewithal to address their mortgage arrears and not on those clients whose circumstances have changed.

Sombe K'e Healing Centre

Members of the Standing Committee on Social Programs have expressed concern in the past with the fate of this former Northern Addictions Services facility.

The Housing Corporation has been in effect subsidizing the operation of a facility, which does not deliver any programming on behalf of the Government of the Northwest Territories.

Members also note the facility has been under-utilized by the present operator and given the fact they recently lost a service contract with Corrections Canada, there is no reasonable hope meeting ongoing operating costs.

The Standing Committee believes the NWT Housing Corporation has been more than accommodating in their attempts to help the operators of the Sombe K'e Healing Centre maintain a viable operation.

The reality is this facility is secured through a mortgage to the NWT Housing Corporation. The mortgage was originally provided because the facility would have some benefit to the residents of the Northwest Territories. There is no reason the Housing Corporation should continue subsidizing in the absence of any tangible benefit to residents of the NWT.

The Standing Committee on Social Programs is pleased with the Minister's commitment to work with the Department of Health and Social Services to determine the best utilization for the Sombe K'e Healing Centre including the possibility of using it as a new Territorial Treatment Centre for Youth.

Transitional Housing, Residency and Program Eligibility

Members of the Standing Committee on Social Programs note there are policy gaps that need to be addressed on a pan-territorial basis to ensure that all residents have equitable access to social housing.

The Transitional Housing Program in Yellowknife is designed to help people without accommodation, transition from outright homelessness into adequate and appropriate housing.

The paradox is that because these people in transitional housing are deemed to be in adequate housing they do not qualify for social housing under the point system used to determine program eligibility. The present low vacancy rate in Yellowknife and the resultant slowdown in turnover of social housing units further compound this situation.

It is obvious there needs to be minor tweaking of the Transitional Housing Program and the program eligibility point system to actually let people transition into public housing where appropriate.

In discussing this situation with the Minister, Members were concerned to hear there was no overall territorial policy on eligibility for social housing, particularly as it relates to residency requirements and that each Local Housing Authority establishes their own residency requirements. In some communities, you have to wait two years to be eligible for social housing. In Yellowknife, you are eligible in 6 months if you are from the Territories and 9 months if you are not.

Residents of a community should not be penalized for leaving their home communities for education or economic opportunities by denying access to social housing on their return.

Members of the Standing Committee believe there needs to be a consistent policy on residency requirements across the territories that ensures residents equitable access to social housing while respecting the mobility rights guaranteed under the Charter.

Department of Health and Social Services

Introduction

The Standing Committee on Social Programs met with the Minister and his officials on January 20, 2003 to discuss the 2003/2004 Main Estimates for the Department of Health and Social Services.

The Standing Committee notes an $13,064,000 increase in the budget over figures presented during the Business Plan Review in September of 2002. There is a $426,000 increase in the Amortization Estimate, $957,000 increase for the implementation of Social Agenda Action Plan, a -$440,000 reduction for cancelled transfer of Hay River H&SS Board Employees to the GNWT, a $1,940,000 increase for the Capital Health Contract, a -$226,000 transfer of Payroll/Benefit Administration for the Fort Smith and Deh Cho Boards to the FMBS, $738,000 to deal with Recruitment and Retention Issues, $1,409,000 for the implementation of the Mental Health, Addictions and Family Violence Strategy and finally, $8,259,000 for the implementation of Interim Health Professional Plan.

Midwives

Members of the Committee were pleased the Interim Health Professional Plan contained funding to hire one midwife each in Fort Smith and Hay River.

This will allow expectant mothers, without any medical complications, to give birth in their home communities.

Capital Allocation Process

The Standing Committee on Social Programs is concerned with how the Capital Allocation Process determines which facility will be built or renovated in advance of other projects.

One of the criteria the Deputy Ministers use in deciding capital allocation is the protection of existing government assets. This means the government will spend money to make sure existing facilities will achieve a maximum operational life. In the case of major facilities such as schools and hospitals the cost of these renovations can run into the millions of dollars.

Such is the case with the Health Centre in Fort Smith. Members of the Standing Committee were first made aware of the perceived need to renovate the Health Centre during the discussion on the 2002/2003 Draft Main Estimates. The renovations and the proposed figure of $10.0 million first appeared in the Capital Acquisition Plan in September of 2002.

Committee Members noted the roof of the Fort Smith Health Centre was renovated this year at a cost of $272,000.

The Standing Committee is having difficulty justifying the half-life renovation of a facility, when there are communities that do not even have a Community Health Centre or resident nurses.

The bigger question is how the Capital Allocation Plan addresses the issue of needed new infrastructure in the communities with the need to protect the government's investment in existing infrastructure. As one Member asked are we, meaning the Department of Health and Social Services, in the business of protecting peoples lives or protecting government assets?"

Until such time as the Department can provide justification for the mid-life renovation of the Fort Smith Health Centre in advance of needed health infrastructure in the communities the Standing Committee recommends the proposed funding be removed from the Capital Allocation Plan.

This recommendation was passed onto the Standing Committee on Accountability and Oversight and conveyed by letter to the Minister of Finance for a response.

The response from the Minister of Finance indicates the Department is planning to complete a Master Development Plan in 2003/2004 to determine program requirements and required facility functionality.

The Government went on to say it prefers to leave the project in the five-year capital acquisition plan subject to the outcome of the Master Development Plan for the Fort Smith Health Centre.

Members of the Standing Committee are concerned with this approach believing there may be a tendency for the program requirements to end up matching the available capital funds.

Health Information Toll-Free Line

Members of the Standing Committee shared the Minister's disappointment over the response to the Request for Proposal issued on providing a Health Information Toll-Free Service and agree the proposed costs were significantly higher than anticipated.

The Committee can understand the Minister's reluctance to go back to the trough, as it were, for increased funding given the significant investment of over $13.0 million the government has made in healthcare since the Review of the Business Plan

However, Members of the Standing Committee, would be even more disappointed if the Department were to let the idea of a Toll-Free Line to provide health information to NWT residents die because there are insufficient funds available at this time. It is hoped that funding may become available through the increase in federal funding for healthcare.

Telehealth

The Standing Committee on Social Programs remain committed to expanding Telehealth availability in the Northwest Territories. Information provided by the Department subsequent to the discussions on the Draft Main Estimates indicates the program is on track and is providing benefit to the medical community and their patients.

NWT Healthcare Cards

Members took note of the current registration process underway for NWT Healthcare Cards. With the attempt to match residents with addresses it should be possible for the Department of Health and Social Services to eliminate much of the Healthcare Card abuse that anecdotal evidence suggests is happening.

Members of the Standing Committee on Social Programs and likely the residents of the Northwest Territories would be interested in having the Minister communicate the results of the registration process once they are available.

Apprehension Rates of Aboriginal Children

Members of the Standing Committee on Social Programs are aware of the serious increase in the number of child apprehensions, particularly in Yellowknife and Inuvik, and have commented on this disturbing trend in past reports.

The Department, up until this year, had done a good job in implementing the recommendations contained in the Child Welfare League of Canada Report on the State of the Child Protection Service in the NWT. Members were very disappointed the funding for the last 11 Child Protection Workers recommended by the Child Welfare League was not contained in this year's budget. This was despite Members' understanding that the implementation of the recommendations was a three-year process and would remain a priority of the Department.

The Standing Committee's understanding of the Child Welfare League Report also had a recommendation relating to the effective supervision of any new Child Protection Workers hired as a result of the Report. Members are concerned the failure to hire the additional 11 Child Protection Workers has also impacted on the number of supervisors and the quality of support available to newly hired Child Protection Workers.

There are some that would argue the reason there have been more apprehensions over the last few years is that by implementing the Child Welfare League recommendations we have hired more Child Protection Workers. More Child Protection Workers translates into more apprehensions. Or it may be a case of there being not being enough supervisors overseeing the work of Child Protection Workers, and the Workers are choosing to apprehend in situation that may not require such drastic measures, but which is outside of their experience.

The Standing Committee does not believe the issues are that simple. The protection of a Child is the focus of the Child Protection Worker. If a child is in an unsafe living environment the Child Protection Worker has the duty and responsibility to remove that child from the situation that gives rise to the protection concerns.

What has been missing from this discussion is the realization many of the problems that families are experiencing that give rise to protection concerns and children being apprehended are not that easy to correct given the lack of services and support available to NWT residents.

Committee would use the example of parents with an alcohol dependency in one of our smaller communities who have had their children apprehended. Before a Child Protection Worker would allow these parents to regain custody of their children they would have to show they no longer drink irresponsibly.

The problem with this is there are no services available in our smaller communities to help the parents recover. There is only one residential treatment program in the Northwest Territories and even if treatment is successful there is a lack of follow-up and support programs available in the person's home community.

If you can't access the services, if you can not get better, you can not regain custody of your children. The Committee is sure there are people who have given up any attempts to regain custody of their children because the challenge of regaining their sobriety or dealing with issues surrounding residential school abuse has proved too onerous.

The Standing Committee is of the opinion there is a need to adjust the current Child Protection system to address the problems that are at the root of the need for apprehensions.

The need for intervention will always be present and the apprehension of children in danger is a necessary part of the equation. However, the Committee believes that the other side of the coin is the need for support for the family in crisis. There must be programs and services in place that help families that want to get healthy and stay that way.

The new Addictions, Mental Health and Family Violence Strategy may help address some of the issues but it can not be used by the Department to abrogate its responsibility to provide support to families in need.

Sombe K'e Healing Centre

The Standing Committee on Social Programs is pleased with the Minister Responsible for the Housing Corporation's commitment to work with the Department of Health and Social Services to determine the best utilization for the Sombe K'e Healing Centre including the possibility of using it as a new Territorial Treatment Centre for Youth.

Members of the Standing Committee had expressed reservations with the Department's plan to spend $3.3 million in renovating the current Territorial Treatment Centre in Yellowknife in light of an existing suitable facility being available.